



22 MAY 2017  
INTERNATIONAL DAY  
FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY  
Biodiversity and Sustainable Tourism

## Biodiversity and Sustainable Tourism: The Pillar of Island Economies

**“Tourism is the pillar of our economy. There is no tourism without the environment.”**  
-The Hon. Dr. Kedrick Pickering, Deputy Premier of the British Virgin Islands

Island nations are often globally renowned for their unique and diverse cultural and natural heritages. Despite these rich assets, island ecosystems are “among the most threatened in the world”, due to their small size, isolation and fragility<sup>1</sup>. Eighty per cent of known species extinctions have occurred on islands<sup>2</sup>. They are also on the frontline of global changes. From ongoing impacts of climate change and resource depletion to invasive species, urban growth, exploitation of natural resources and food pressures, islands are classified among the most vulnerable nations by the international community<sup>3</sup>.

A number of island leaders are taking significant actions to protect their natural assets as the pillar of sustainable tourism and development. Tourism is a major economic driver for many island nations. Tourism is an important source of foreign exchange, providing more than 20% of GDP for several<sup>4</sup>.

The 2014 SAMOA Pathway<sup>5</sup> recognizes that tourism is an important contributor to sustainable economic growth and job creation, and it supports Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in effectively taking actions that will allow local people to benefit from tourism, scaling-up and diversifying of tourism activities, enhancing employment opportunities for all groups, including women and youth while conserving ecosystems and biodiversity. In the Caribbean, tourism receipts represent 30% of total exports, in comparison to the global average of just over 5%.



Convention on  
Biological Diversity





Tourists are attracted to the characteristic biodiversity and pristine environments of islands. The native plant and animal species of islands are often not found anywhere else on Earth. This biodiversity also provides crucial component for food security for many SIDS. For example, coral reefs provide an estimated \$375 billion per year in goods and services to the world. Not only is marine biodiversity economically important, but the natural ecosystems of islands are multi-purpose. They influence/shape traditional cultural and customary practices, serving as buffer zones, habitats for endemic species, and are sources of medicines.

However, island biodiversity is extremely vulnerable to the intense pressures of invasive species, tourism, climate change, natural disasters and overexploitation. As islands continue to lose biodiversity and natural assets, they are forced to increasingly depend on imported goods leading to: 1) decreased food security; 2) increased Non-Communicable Diseases; 3) indifference to nature and its assets, as well as destruction of such; and 4) loss of cultural identity.

## Issues regarding biodiversity and tourism for islands

Problems in islands are interconnected and require multi-sector solutions. For instance, poor water quality can cause health problems, discourage tourism and contribute to the decline of coral reefs. Disappearing reefs harm fisheries and also impact tourism. Improving water quality requires investments in energy-intensive infrastructure (like water treatment plants). But energy in the islands is expensive, because it typically is produced by importing fossil fuels. With small islands being isolated and highly vulnerable to external effects, they face several challenges where tourism and biodiversity are concerned:

### **Impact on natural resources**

While tourism is the major supporter of the economy of many islands, it simultaneously puts a large amount of pressure on the natural resources of islands, especially SIDS. Islands typically have limited water and energy supplies, and often pay high prices for these commodities. The tourism sector requires a large amount of natural resources to support tourists, which means that islands are usually diverting much of these to the tourism sector and away from local needs. Tourism activities can also cause harm to the environmental resources and biodiversity of islands through introduction of invasive species, removal of endemic plants and animals, and pollution of beaches and other cultural heritage sites. Examples of direct impacts include tourists breaking of corals, and removal of natural assets like shells and sea stars for “souvenirs”, and damage to reefs and reef biodiversity by boats and tourists including impacts of chemical sunscreens.



## **Over-dependency on the tourism sector**

Islands relying on tourism as the sole or major contributor to GDP are increasingly susceptible to external shocks and stressors that might decrease the number of tourists at any given time. For example, fluctuations in the prices of air transportation can mean a reduction in visitation to a specific island. If this occurs for an extended period of time, it might cause GDP to decline sharply. Islands must consider ways to diversify their economies to buffer against external changes in the tourism sector.

## **Sensitivity to climate change and natural disasters**

For SIDS, most of the tourism infrastructure is located along the coast, such as hotels and private beaches. With climate change, this infrastructure is highly threatened by sea level rise, coastline/beach erosion and natural disasters such as hurricanes which bring strong winds and storm surges. These external forces can be detrimental to the tourism sectors of islands.

## **Building local capacity to promote sustainable tourism**

A challenge for sustainable tourism is the gap in local capacity for environmental management. Even when there is an interest in becoming more sustainable, there are logistic and economic barriers limiting the ability for the hotels and tourism related institutions to improve their practices, as there isn't sufficient technology or know-how for activities such as green certification and environmental audits<sup>6</sup>. Effectively conveying the need for tourists to respect the environment can be challenging to SIDS.

## **Consistent political will**

A key challenge is lack of political will and/or capacity to take a holistic approach to sustainable development. There is often a clash between the desire for conservation and the economic gains from development either of hotels and infrastructure or over exploitation of natural resources.

---

This press brief was written by Kristin Qui for the Global Island Partnership (GLISPA).

<sup>1</sup> Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (The Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, BPoA). Bridgetown, Barbados, 25 April-6 May 1994, Annex II, preamble, paragraph 6.

<sup>2</sup> CBD COP13 (Decision XI/15, Paragraph 1)

<sup>3</sup> As a result of their specific situation, islands and specifically Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have been recognized as a "special case both for environment and sustainable development" in [Agenda 21](#) (chapter 17, section G; 1992), followed by the [Barbados Programme of Action \(1994\)](#) and the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Stated in [The Reunion Island Declaration for Sustainable Tourism in Islands](#)

<sup>5</sup> [www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537](http://www.sids2014.org/index.php?menu=1537)





## Important Links:

- Canadian Association for the Club of Rome: <http://canadiancor.com/challenge-sustainable-tourism-small-island-developing-states-sids/>
- Réunion Island Declaration on Sustainable Tourism in Islands: [http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/reunion\\_declaration\\_final\\_en\\_0.pdf](http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/pdf/reunion_declaration_final_en_0.pdf)
- SAMOA Pathway: UN System Implementation Matrix: [www.sids2014.org/content/documents/612SAMOA%20Pathway%20implementation%20matrix\\_UN%20system.pdf](http://www.sids2014.org/content/documents/612SAMOA%20Pathway%20implementation%20matrix_UN%20system.pdf)
- The International Year of Small Island Developing States 2014: [www.un.org/en/events/islands2014/#&panel1-1](http://www.un.org/en/events/islands2014/#&panel1-1)
- The Convention on Biological Diversity, programme of work on island biodiversity: [www.cbd.int/island/default.shtml](http://www.cbd.int/island/default.shtml)
- Tourism in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), United Nations World Tourism Organization: <http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/tourisminsids.pdf>
- Small Island Developing States, United Nations: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sids>
- COP 11 Decision XI/15, Review of the programme of work on island biodiversity: [www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=13176](http://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=13176)

### Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity

413, Saint Jacques Street, suite 800  
Montreal, Quebec, H2Y 1N9  
Canada

Tel.: +1 514 288 2220  
Fax: +1 514 288 6588  
[secretariat@cbd.int](mailto:secretariat@cbd.int)



[www.cbd.int/idb/2017](http://www.cbd.int/idb/2017)